

Asbestos cleanup scheduled to begin in June

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*Grace will pay one way or the other,
says EPA*

By David F. Latham of The Montanian

The cleanup of tremolite asbestos at two former vermiculite sites in and near Libby will begin in June, Grace & Co. will pay the costs, according to an official of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "We're planning two removals this summer ... at the former screening plant and the former expanding plant," said Diana Hammer of EPA's Helena office. Hammer was speaking at a meeting of the Community Advisor April 27 in Libby.

Grace announced April 18 that it rejected an EPA plan for removing asbestos from the company's form screening plant and expanding plant. But the cleanup will happen regardless of Grace's approval, EPA. The former screening plant was located on Hwy. 37 at Rainy Creek Road and is now the site of Raintree Nursery. The former expanding plant was located on property now owned by the city of Libby, adjacent the rail and baseball fields near the Hwy. 37 Kootenai River bridge. Millwork West is presently located there but is trying to find a new location for that business, according to Libby Mayor Tony Berget.

Hammer told the group, "We're hoping to start [the cleanup] early June. We hope to have those completed by the end of September. [W.R. Grace] didn't want to sign any sort of consensual agreement," Hammer said.

"We're now left with a couple of options. One is, we order them to do it ... [that is,] we say, here's the cleanup needs to be done, here's how you need to do it, here's the time frame, go to it," Hammer said.

"Our second option is ... we tap into the [EPA] Superfund ... we pay, we hire contractors, we do the cleanup and we go back and bill Grace for it. Regardless of the options, Grace will ultimately pay," Hammer said.

The company has reasons for not wanting to sign an agreement with EPA, according to Carol Ray, who is not a company representative. (Grace representative Alan Stringer could not attend the meeting because of an out-of-town commitment.)

"Part of [the reason Grace won't sign] is because the analytical method has not been determined. They would have been signing onto an agreement ... that they didn't know what they were signing on to ... they have been signing a blank check," Ray said.

Ray also questioned the wisdom of disturbing the sites until more is known about the risk they pose.

"Can I ask [EPA], if you have not adequately determined how you're even going to measure a risk, why are you going to disturb those sites before you know how you're going to measure those risks? And why are you rushing into that step?" Ray asked.

Hammer said the two sites are clearly a risk and cleanup is warranted.

"It's very clear that there's a high level of asbestos [at the two sites] in the soil and in some cases, building materials need to be removed. There's no question about the risk," Hammer said.

Raintree Nursery owner Lerah Parker spoke of the need for immediate cleanup.

"We're still exposing the people in Libby [to asbestos]. There's a high school drinking party every Friday on Rainy Creek Road and everyone up there is getting exposed. It needs to be cleaned up now," Parker said. Gayla Benefield asked why EPA had not immediately moved Parker and her husband Mel, who live at the Raintree Nursery site, when their property was identified as being contaminated with asbestos.

"The risk of asbestos in the soil is high, too high, and it's very clear we need to take some action," Hammer said. "That didn't translate into an immediate health risk ... like if it were a chlorine spill. I think for that reason we haven't [moved the Parkers]."

Grace operated Libby's vermiculite mine from 1963 to 1990. The EPA has determined that at least two sites contain dangerous levels of asbestos. EPA is waiting until the dry weather of summer to conduct tests on Rainy Creek Road.

Medical screening has begun